

(Washington DC) Yesterday, President Bush began stressing the importance of employer sanctions as a vital component of comprehensive immigration legislation. In a speech at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, President Bush recognized that the current level of fines for employers who knowingly hire undocumented workers is inadequate, which he compared to "paying for speeding tickets."

Congressman Charlie Gonzalez (D-San Antonio, TX) introduced legislation last fall as a stand alone bill (H.R. 4038) and as an amendment to the House immigration bill that would substantially increase fines to \$50,000 for each offense. Moreover, these monies would be largely used to reimburse the states, counties, and cities that bear the costs spent on the health and education of illegal immigrant workers and their families. No Republicans voted for the amendment to H.R. 4437, the House immigration bill, and it was defeated 87-332.

"I commend the President for recognizing that any comprehensive immigration bill must have stronger sanctions against those employers who break the law by hiring undocumented workers," said Congressman Gonzalez. "Now, Republicans in the House need to heed the President because when we considered the House immigration bill in December, they voted unanimously against my amendment, which would have put teeth in enforcement provisions against law-breaking employers.

It makes no sense to me for Republicans to claim that they want to end the flow of undocumented workers into America yet not use the best tool to achieve that goal. The workforce is subject to the same laws of supply and demand that rule the marketplace. If you cut the demand for undocumented workers through tough employer sanctions, then the supply will dwindle. But, House Republicans are using the immigration issue for political gain, so only rhetoric and provisions that will inflame their base are discussed.

Of course, we need to enforce the laws on the books and so far the Bush administration has not done that job. Last year, out of an estimated 11 million illegal immigrants, only 3 U.S. employers were cited for hiring illegal workers. Furthermore, the number of man-hours spent going after employers is now just 25% of what it was five years ago (when President Bush first took office.) If we are not going to invest the man-hours in enforcement, then stronger laws will not have their intended effect."

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